

Cornelia Hediger Doppelgänger



Early 20th Century psychoanalysis, and in particular the writings of Sigmund Freud, have entered the common lexicon and emotional makeup of our culture like none of the other new “sciences” formulated and articulated at the turn of the last century. Although many have never read Freud’s work, or experienced therapy, concepts such as the ego and the unconscious are so common that they have all but lost their connection to the ideas developed to the study and treatment of human behaviour. Common Freudian references come thick and fast in the work of Swiss artist Cornelia Hediger whose elaborate tableaux pay more than homage to the Austrian doctor whose theories changed the face of human emotional study forever. As anyone who has gone through art college knows psychoanalysis is also a much used (and abused) tool for analysis of artwork which gained enormous popularity in the 1970s but has been waning since.

In a way it’s too easy to apply such analysis to Hediger’s work as she so knowingly references such theories and to parrot them back to her is somewhat obvious and leaves the analysis in a benign and self serving agreement. Yes, she is a woman playing out internal and unconscious desires and fears publicly through an analysis of self but there is more going on and self portraiture has certainly moved on too. Historically the self portrait (specifically the painted self portrait) has been understood as a representation of emotions, showing an outward expression of inner feelings, penetrating self-analysis and self-contemplation to give the artist a kind of immortality. It has historically been understood as a Humanist term, indicating something inherent and nameable, and by extension a stable universalized subject. With the advent of Postmodernism and the self became something more indexical – a reflexive conditional term – which lead to the belief that there is no true self just a series of masquerades. The self split, merged, fractured and became so performed and so constructed that nothing authentic remained.

Hediger’s work sits somewhere between the two extremes of each theory, both of which have been tested out and worked through to their conclusions by contemporary artists. By presenting two (or more) sides of her personality the viewer is immediately thrown into a situation where he or she believes that one is the “real” Cornelia and the other is not. The title *Doppelgänger* reinforces this. One is never sure, however, which is which and



interpretations of good and evil can often apply to each Cornelia and shift in a single viewing depending on your point of view. For example in 03.06.08 the Cornelia falling down the stairs may be crazily perusing the poised Cornelia or the poised Cornelia, who leans nonchalantly against the stairwell wall, may have coolly instigated a fall like the evil villain in a Bond film who strokes his Burmese cat whilst wreaking havoc on the poor unsuspecting people around him.

03.06.08 (both set 1 and 2) also have the Freudian symbolism of falling downstairs being an unconscious sign of anxiety (phallus anxiety specifically). Due to the tableaux being played out in the stairwell one is also reminded of the short story *The Cares of a Family Man* (1919) by Franz Kafka, whose half human creature Odradek lurks in the public spaces of buildings. Most of Hediger’s photographs in this series occur in a confined space and very few venture out of a detailed domestic setting. There are, however, plenty of half open doors heavy in symbolism of uncertainty, indecision and hesitancy.

The grid literally fractures her body (and self) and is a logical development from her earlier work, which adopted the use of an uncanny deflated doll as a double the mysteriously titled series *The Future is Cancelled* and the use of blur in her earliest series *Exit*. Both have strong compositional and conceptual references to artists such as Francesca Woodman and Anna Gaskell and as a result





Dopplegänger does feel the most self-assured and authentic – like she has found her stride. Hediger’s voice is strong and confident and the technique supremely appropriate to the subject matter. What does carry through in all the series is an obvious interest in styling and the importance of dress to create a scene. Many of the images in the more polished *Dopplegänger* have the hint of a fashion still, albeit one that favours idiosyncratic thrift rather than this seasons couture. But she is a skilled stylist paying almost obsessive attention to the drape of a skirt, the wrinkle of a stocking, knowing how a netted petticoat will appear when both seated and upright. It may sound unimportant but it’s crucial to the effect of the picture, so much so that each section of the grid never feels sloppy.

It’s a laborious process and it can often take up to eight hours to produce one image of six individual panels and as many as one hundred and twenty images can be shot. If one doesn’t work out the whole thing has to start again as light changes and postures cannot be recreated in exactly the same way. With so many retakes there is room for happy accidents to happen and so an element of spontaneity can enter what is otherwise a very controlling environment. The grid also allows her to play with scale. She can loom over herself or shrink under her own presence. Her legs can appear enviously long or ridiculously truncated. Like the attention she pays to the clothes she also has a sophisticated knowledge of how her body moves

and poses. She is in complete control and knows when to exaggerate a gesture to get the narrative across like a silent movie star or fashion model. It sounds easy but we all know how gawky we can appear in photographs, an accusation that could never be applied to Hediger. She always appears exquisite despite the domestic pleasures and terrors that surround her.

Although the narrative tableaux never directly spell out a story and thrive on ambiguity there are plenty of recurring themes, which suggest larger personal experiences and feeling. She is often caught in the guilty act of doing something sexual and the frequent appearances of plastic dolls suggest a painful experience with fertility, childbirth or maternity. The tea drinking (not from a mug but from a cup and saucer) implies a claustrophobia of manners and the regular use of the bed as a prop reminds us that it can be a place of unfulfilled desires and nightmares as well as sweet dreams. Such obliqueness demands that we fill in the blanks from our own experience and madly speculate about hers.

Also important (although not crucial) is seeing the work in sequence. Each photograph works well as a one off but to see how the images have developed over the four years she has been working on the series is a fascinating process. The *Dopplegänger* series presents absorbing developments in the genre of self portraiture, which is currently enjoying a “renaissance”, but as the work develops it subtly shifts to pay more attention to the interiors and play more with scale, and as such it takes attention away solely from the notion of the self and adds a questioning layer regarding domesticity. She stays purposefully out of the kitchen to avoid clichés regarding femininity and the home. This shift is a technical development as well as a conceptual one and from last year onwards Hediger has worked solely in her apartment building sets. For each photograph she paints the wall, changes the carpet and buys props – a process that can take up to a week. Considering the time which each tableaux takes and the work involved to create it she is enormously prolific. The shift to a space where she has even more control ultimately makes for a more complex and satisfying photograph and lays interesting ground for further developments or a new series altogether. SUSAN BRIGHT





